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Forensic teams sent to tsunami-hit areas

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HICKAM AIR FORCE BASE, Hawaii -- Three special U.S. military forensic-analysis teams were sent last night to help in the daunting task of body-identification in the Indian Ocean tsunami, as the number of Americans and others believed killed in the catastrophe continued to climb.

The eight-member teams, comprising civilian forensic anthropologists and dentists as well as military mortuary affairs experts and forensic photographers, will join two more U.S. teams already sent to work with local officials in the disaster area.

The teams are expected to help process bodies in the coming weeks in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the other nations hardest hit by the tsunami, which has killed more than 139,000 people so far.

Meanwhile yesterday, State Department officials more than doubled the number of Americans initially believed dead, to 36 killed in the Dec. 26 earthquake-fueled tsunami. Another 3,500 Americans, who were in the region for work or on holiday when the disaster hit, are still missing.

Nineteen of the 20 newly listed as dead yesterday were in Thailand and the 20th in Sri Lanka, State Department deputy spokesman Adam Ereli told reporters in Washington.

"In each of these cases, there is a specific reason to believe that the individual was in harm's way at the time of the tsunami," he said.

Mr. Ereli did not name any of the 36 Americans killed, citing family privacy, beyond saying that none was a U.S. government official.

The forensic-analysis teams, drawn from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii, will help local authorities identify casualties and sort out Americans from the piles of bodies that remain in some areas.

"As they're watching all of the remains that are coming in, it is their job to identify any that are Westerners," said Army Maj. Gen. W. Montague Winfield, who heads the command, which normally specializes in identifying remains of soldiers recovered on battlefields of past U.S. wars.

In the area hit by the tsunami, the teams will bring special expertise in identifying bodies that have decayed beyond normal visual or fingerprint recognition, said Robert Mann, deputy scientific director of the command's laboratory in Hawaii.

As human remains decompose and "become more and more skeletalized, the identification process becomes more and more difficult," Mr. Mann said.

"What we're taking with us is expertise," he said, adding the forensic teams will add dental record experts and specialists capable of determining the age, race and sex of a person by examining skeletal remains.

This could be particularly useful in areas where bodies have been stacked in temples, schools or other places without refrigeration. In regards to finding Americans killed in the disaster, one official yesterday said that "the thing we need to do is get over there and make sure they didn't just put them in mass graves or cremation" without processing them for potential identification.

The forensic teams left Hawaii yesterday with other military relief teams and goods aboard a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III cargo jet bound for Utapao, Thailand, from which U.S. military aid efforts throughout the coastal Indian Ocean region are being orchestrated.

The C-17, based out of Charleston Air Force Base in South Carolina, stopped in Hawaii en route to the disaster area.

The Air Force has dispatched six such jets for the effort, as well as 14 smaller C-130 cargo planes and five bigger C-5 jets, the military's most massive, for hauling equipment or aid around the world, Air Force Lt. Gen. Victor E. Renuart Jr. said.

"This is a huge, huge effort," he said of the mission.

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